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LIS 6909 DIS: Qualitative Methods

Writeup of Charmaz (2006)

Charmaz, K. (2006). An invitation to grounded theory. In *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis* (pp. 1-12). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Summary

In this chapter, Charmaz (2006) provided an overview of the process, emergence, and evolution of grounded theory as an epistemology and methodology. She started with a short ethnographic and biographical sketch of a high school senior with rheumatoid arthritis, including two paragraphs from an interview with her. She used this as a springboard to explain how "grounded theory methods [can] help you get started, stay involved, and finish your project," pursuing questions that might arise from such ethnographic data through the "systematic, yet flexible guidelines [it provides] for collecting and analyzing qualitative data" (p. 2). A major tenet of the approach is "being open" to and starting with one's data, building and grounding theory in this data rather than in any preconceived hypotheses or the literature (p. 3). Through "making and coding numerous comparisons" of the data gathered from multiple participants and informants, as well as writing memos and notes, "our analytic grasp of the data begins to take form" (p. 3); tentative categories are formed and tested with both old and new data, filling in the gaps until the categories coalesce into a grounded theory. The grounded theory approach emerged from the collaboration of Glaser (who contributed a positivist, logical, and systematic epistemology and methodology) and Strauss (who contributed a pragmatic Chicago school epistemology and ethnographic methods), who first articulated the approach in their 1967 book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*; this fought back against a trend towards a positivist epistemology and quantitative methods by proposing "systematic qualitative analysis" and strategies for generating "abstract theoretical explanations of social processes" (p. 5). The defining components of Glaser and Strauss's original grounded theory were (a) "simultaneous … data collection and analysis" (p. 5); (b) coding from data, not preconceptions or deductive hypotheses; (c) "the constant comparative method … making comparisons during each stage of the analysis" (p. 5); (d) constantly advancing and developing theory; (e) writing memos about categories and their relationships; (f) theoretical sampling driven by theory construction; and (g) not reviewing the literature until after an independent analysis. Glaser and Strauss's different backgrounds led to their diversion later in their careers, Glaser remaining true to "grounded theory as … [systematic] discovery" while Strauss (working with Corbin) became more

interested in "verification" and emphasized the constant comparative method less. Newer approaches by Bryant, Charmaz, Clarke, and Seale have "moved grounded theory away from … positivism," focusing on it "as a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages" (p. 9). Charmaz concluded with a brief overview of the rest of her book, based on the grounded theory process as shown in her figure 1.1 (p. 10).

Analysis

Charmaz's initial example provided an excellent introduction to grounded theory, and would be particularly good for those with no or only extremely fuzzy ideas of how the methodology and approach works. To someone familiar with other epistemological and methodological choices in qualitative research, at times the first few pages of her chapter feel just a little like a "hard sell"; language like "grounded theory methods will help you get started" (p. 2) and "grounded theory methods … expedite your research and enhance your excitement about it" (p. 4) make it seem like Charmaz is trying to convince her readers that grounded theory is better than the alternatives. I guess this is expected in the introductory chapter of a book on practical grounded theory, and thankfully there is not too much of it. Charmaz clearly presents a broad conception of grounded theory, not just as originally conceived by Glaser and Strauss but as refined by each of them, by their collaborators, and by other researchers and scholars. As an introduction to grounded theory, her chapter certainly serves its purpose and should prove useful for beginning researchers interested in grounded theory. I would recommend it be paired with another more practical reading (such as Charmaz's own later chapter on coding in grounded theory) and, of course, with readings on other possible approaches to qualitative research so that researchers can decide where their own methodological and epistemological beliefs lie.

Keywords: grounded theory, epistemology, methodology, research process, history, evolution, ethnographic, ethnography, systematic, flexible, guidelines, coding, constant comparative method, comparison, memos, categories, positivism, pragmatism, Chicago school

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Writeup of Strauss and Corbin (1994)

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology: An overview. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 273-285). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Summary

Strauss and Corbin (1994) provided what they termed an "overview" of grounded theory; this focused less on the actual practice of the methodology and instead looked at its similarities and differences with other methods, discussed its evolution over time in both conception and use, explored grounded theories *as* theories, and anticipated trends in the future evolution of grounded theory. They first stressed the nature of grounded theory as a method "grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" through constant comparison (p. 273). The theory "may be generated initially from the data, or, if existing (grounded) theories seem appropriate," from elaboration and modification of these through comparison of "incoming data …against them" (p. 273). It is broadly similar to many other qualitative research methods in its (a) use of interviews, observations, and documentary sources; (b) ability to be combined in mixed method approaches; and (c) interpretive focus. The major difference is its focus on developing theory, particularly conceptually and relationally dense theories (which the authors contrasted against thick description). Next, Strauss and Corbin presented the history of grounded theory, including its application by the originators (Glaser and Strauss) and their students (pp. 275-276). They noted its increasing use outside of sociology and in combination with other methods, as well as the variety of data sources, design structures, social and intellectual movements, and procedures now used in grounded theory research. They also argued (p. 277) that "the methodology now runs the risk of becoming fashionable," stressing the importance of theoretical coding and of not ignoring "extant (grounded) theories" and one's existing "training, reading, and research experience"; they particularly noted "many … have missed … [these] more realistic and balanced modifications" to grounded theory. Grounded theories themselves consist of "plausible relationships proposed among concepts and sets of concepts," the relationships being expressed through "discursive presentation" (as opposed to if/then propositions; p. 278). They are typically substantive theories, but formal theories can also be constructed; this does require data from more substantive areas and works better when working from existing grounded theories. They further stated that "[grounded] theories are interpretations made from [the] given perspectives"

(p. 279) of multiple human actors—particularly through "in vivo" coding (p. 280)—and require "theoretical sensitivity," sensitivity to "disciplinary or professional knowledge … research and personal experiences" (p. 280). Strauss and Corbin concluded by predicting that (a) the use of grounded theory would continue to grow, especially in combination with other qualitative and quantitative methods; (b) fields would combine it with methodologies traditionally seen as competing; (c) the use of technology in grounded theory would increase; and (d) specific sets of procedures and variations on grounded theory would be developed for use in specific research areas.

Analysis

Like Charmaz's (2006) second chapter, Strauss and Corbin's chapter included a large number of important points on grounded theory research. Unfortunately, I did not find their chapter as well organized or as easy to read as Charmaz's chapters. This is not to say Strauss and Corbin were especially difficult to understand, but their language was not quite as clear and the organization was somewhat more haphazard. Their version of grounded theory—which they note that "others who have been part of this intellectual movement will differ" with (p. 273, in footnote)—allows researchers to have preconceptions and to bring existing theories (albeit only those already grounded) to a grounded theory analysis; these must be carefully tested and compared, however, against the data, a process Charmaz also stressed. Strauss and Corbin's version of grounded theory thus does lack some of the enforced structure and positivism of early grounded theory, but still features more structure and positivistic leanings than some may like. Personally I feel they provide a relative balance between the alternatives, an approach that is probably more practical than "purer" (so to speak) forms of grounded theory. Their article is recommended for prospective and current researchers interested in grounded theory; I would, however, caution such readers to carefully read the chapter—possibly outlining or summarizing it to ensure they grasp its import—and to remember it presents only one view of grounded theory.

Keywords: grounded theory, similarities, differences, evolution, history, constant comparative method, existing theories, concepts, propositions, relations, thick description, theoretical coding, substantive theory, formal theory, in vivo, interpretive, multiple perspectives, theoretical sensitivity

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Writeup of Charmaz (2006)

Charmaz, K. (2006). Coding in grounded theory practice. In *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis* (pp. 42-71). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Summary

In this chapter Charmaz (2006) presented a practical guide to coding in grounded theory. She defined coding, the "first step" in analysis, as "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (p. 43). Codes should "stick closely to the data [and] show actions" and meanings (p. 45) and "are short" (p. 45). They are not preconceived—although one should "acknowledge that researchers hold prior ideas and skills" (p. 48)—but instead are "construct[ed]" (p. 47) based on "what we see in the data" (p. 46). They may be "*in vivo* codes," which are "general … innovative … [or] shorthand terms" used by participants that "capture [significant] meanings … experience[s] … [or] perspectives" (p. 55; see also examples on p. 56-57); these must be integrated into the theory with other codes.

"Grounded theory coding … [has] at least two main phases" which Charmaz labels "initial coding" and "focused coding" (p. 46). "During initial coding" the researcher should ask what they are studying, what the data suggests, from whose point of view the data comes from, and what theoretical category a specific piece of data indicates (p. 47); a focus on processes is common. Charmaz recommended initial coding should be done quickly, with "spontaneity" (p. 48), should "preserve actions," and should "compare data with data" (p. 49). Coding may take place line-by-line or incident-by-incident; Charmaz suggested the latter was more appropriate for observation notes, while the former works better for transcriptions, documents, and ethnographies. Both types, but line-by-line coding especially, employ "flexible strategies" that include "breaking the data up" into parts, "defining … actions," considering "tacit assumptions" and "implicit actions and meanings," summarizing "the significance of the points" (p. 50), using "constant comparative methods" that "make comparisons at each level of analytic work" (p. 54), and finding "gaps in the data" (p. 50). Careful initial coding allows researchers to ensure their analysis has "fit and relevance" for the "empirical world" (p. 54) and "to see the familiar in new light" (p. 55). The second phase, focused coding, follows initial coding and selects "the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes [in order] to sift through [and synthesize] large amounts

of data" (p. 57). It is "not entirely a linear process" (p. 58), but is cyclical and emergent; one may return to initial coding if unexpected insights emerge later in analysis.

Two other coding phases are also sometimes included in grounded theory to relate codes to each other. The first, Strauss and Corbin's "axial coding" (p. 60), links categories and subcategories together that develop in focused coding. Charmaz argued that it encourages the use of an analytical frame—an organizational scheme that links codes together—and thus is not always a useful approach and may "make grounded theory cumbersome" (p. 63) and less flexible. Her own approach to linking categories and constructing a model (pp. 61-62) was less structured and more flexible. The second, Glaser's "theoretical coding" (p. 63), relates codes and concepts to each other "as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory" (Glaser, 1978, as cited in Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). Charmaz argued that, like Strauss and Corbin, Glaser encouraged the use of analytical frames he termed "coding families" (p. 63); she contended these "may hone your work with a sharp analytic edge" if used skillfully (p. 63), but should not be seen "as some objective criteria about which scholars would agree" (p. 66). Charmaz concluded with a brief discussion of "reducing problems in coding" (p. 67), including the issues of preconceived ideas, differing types and levels of codes, and different levels of detail in data (e.g. transcriptions vs. field notes) that researchers following a grounded theory approach must consider.

Analysis

This was a relatively long chapter, and Charmaz packed a substantial portion of practical advice into it; this is one major reason why the summary above is longer than usual. The elements of a "hard sell" that I felt slightly undercut her opening chapter were gone here, and she presented a relatively—but not entirely—unbiased look at the practice of coding in grounded theory. My main point of disagreement with grounded theory—at least with some versions thereof—is in the focus on researchers having limited preconceptions at best when they begin analysis. Charmaz was less strict on this than some, agreeing that researchers will bring some "prior ideas and skills" (p. 48) to the table; she also provided some suggestions on how to deal with preconceptions in her concluding pages. Certainly all researchers should be aware and be willing to admit that they have given epistemological, philosophical, and theoretical beliefs about a given problem prior to beginning a study; in grounded theory this is especially important, although I am unsure it is possible to entirely put these beliefs aside as some would argue must be done. Charmaz's discussion of the potential problems with axial and theoretical coding is

useful, albeit somewhat biased against these approaches and perhaps taking a different interpretation of them than that intended—originally or more recently—by the original authors (M. M. Kazmer, personal communication, July 15, 2010; see also Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Using a particular perspective—pre-conceived or not—as a framing device in the analysis process will be helpful; however, one must be careful not to reduce flexibility and not consider other valid possibilities and frames. Charmaz's chapter both provided practical advice and promotes theoretical and epistemological thinking about grounded theory; as such I would doubly and highly recommend it to students and scholars interested in qualitative research and especially those looking to pursue a grounded theory approach.

Keywords: grounded theory, coding, practice, theoretical, epistemological, preconceptions, in vivo, initial coding, focused coding, constant comparative method, comparison, line-by-line, incident-by-incident, flexible, synthesize, cyclical, emergent, axial coding, theoretical coding, categorization, problems in coding